

People's Remembrancers to a Welsh Republic

by Gwyn A. Williams

'Why take needless alarms?' Iolo Morganwg once asked his long-suffering wife, Peggy, who used to comment on his vagaries in pungent verse, 'I do not intend to publish my petition for the Abolition of Christianity until long after I have finished with the work in hand'.

This stone-mason from the Vale of Glamorgan, who went on epic journeyman tramp all over Wales and southern England (with his walking pack arranged so that he could read while he walked) stands out now as our most fecund, if maimed, genius, an 'organic intellectual' from his seven-league slippers to his Merlin hair.

He was born Edward Williams in 1747 into a family which would have interested the early D. H. Lawrence. His father, intelligent and literate, was a working stone-mason. His mother, frail, aloof, a dreamer, was both the poor kinswoman of a distinguished gentry family and a descendant of one of Glamorgan's dynasties of Welsh poets. She never let Iolo forget his twin cultural inheritance. It was after her death that he began to take laudanum for his asthma and to collect documents. He became addicts of both. His little cottage at Flemingston came to resemble the house of the historian in Anatole France's *Penguin Island*, who finally drowned in his own papers.

Taught his skills by local literary gentlemen, steeped in the beery eisteddfods and vivid folk-culture of Glamorgan, he locked into the world of poets and antiquarians, north and south and, completely bilingual, was free of English and, to some extent, French and Latin writing. He plundered libraries, collections, poets' homes wholesale and built himself into the most learned man in Wales on Welsh literature, history and antiquities.

Failed shopkeeper, shipper, farmer, he emerged from a debtors' jail in Cardiff to establish contact with the effervescent London-Welsh during the 1790s, the heady days of the Age of Revolution. This was a time when people discovered The People, when intellectuals stamped nations out of the ground and wove new tricolours out of old legends, when, among 'non-historic' peoples, to publish a dictionary was a revolutionary act. In this last, warm, freethinking, sometimes pagan, glow from an old but awakening Wales before the Calvinist curtain came down, Iolo was re-born as *The Bard of Liberty*.

He was caught in the blizzard of repression unleashed by William Pitt, with the witch-hunting mobs of John Reeves the Loyalist in full, reactionary cry against *Jacobins*.

'All the whores and thieves of London are assembled about the fellow called *Reeves*' wrote Iolo, 'and his *fiddlers and faddlers* in a mighty band, *bawling and squawling* like the Songs of Caterwauling, *God-save-the-king* — *Church and King for ever! Blast your eyes! Cry Church and King, damn your soul!*'

Iolo, confronted by the Black Hundreds, displayed a Welsh flexibility... 'I jabbered Welsh, squeaked out *Church SANS King* in as broken a manner as I could and passed for a Dutchman'.

He was shopped to the Privy Council by Edward Jones the Harpist. They threatened him over his 'seditious papers' (notably his sketches for a Gorsedd of Bards of the Island of Britain, which he had shipped back via Bristol to a suitably Welsh obscurity)... 'I will put you, said one, in Custody of the Messengers. Do so, said I... and ask the laws of England for what!' (or, at least, so he

reported the encounter).

Mrs Nicholl, chief patron of his projected Druidic history of the 'Bards', promptly cut off all support... 'she would not purchase poetry as fine as Homer's, were it written by a Republican'. Scores of others copied *The Billingsgate Bitch*.

Undeterred, at the depth of the repression in 1795, when half of Wales was starved and riotous and Welsh families by the hundred were threading their way through redcoats, militia and Navy sloops to the America boats, Iolo addressed his mock writ to his friend William Owen, leader of the Welsh revival..

'Be it known unto all men by these presents that on Wednesday, the 20th day of May, *one thousand seven hundred and eight o'clock*, and exactly at five o'clock in the evening, *Citizens and Sans-Culottes George Dyer and Iolo Morganwg*, being instigated thereto by the Devil, intend to set out from Chancery



Lane thence to proceed to Pratt Place, Camden Town, and there, with force of arms, to enter the house of . . . William Owen . . . 'to drink tea and eat bread and butter till they "can eat and drink no more-o!" and after that to talk of *Politics, republicanism, Jacobinism, Carmagnolism, Sans-Culottism* and a number of other wicked and trayterous *isms* against the peace of the Lords *Kingism and Parsonism*, their crowns and dignities'.

Historians have made far too much of Iolo's later verse to Glamorgan volunteers and other 'patriotic' spasms. These were an expression of that tribal rally against Napoleon which swept up many of his kind. To the end, Iolo did not lose his radical, indeed republican bite. The shop he ran in Cowbridge was notorious as a 'Jacobin' den; he helped to launch the Unitarian Association in 1802 at Merthyr, among its 'sturdy old Republicans'. He lost a job with the Board of Agriculture because he was a democrat. The police were on the point of dispersing the first Gorsedd in London in 1792 and the Volunteers did disperse another in Wales. If Government had read his letter on the French landing in Fishguard in 1797, he'd have been transported . . .

'Breeches, petticoats, shirts, blankets, sheets . . . have been most wofully defiled in South Wales lately on hearing that a thimblefull of Frenchmen landed on our coasts . . . Are there no lamp-irons in Downing St? I fear the hemp crop of the last season failed. We must allow that the French are beforehand with us in the most useful arts and sciences, witness their invention and use of the *guillotine*'.

It was as a Welsh patriot, a Republican (i.e. a traitor) a Unitarian (i.e. an Infidel) and a Freemason (i.e. a subversive of all established hierarchies) that Iolo Morganwg invented that Gorsedd of Bards which is today the central, the most colourful, and to many the most ludicrous, feature of the only native institution which the Welsh, until recently, could boast.

It was, of course, a fabrication. This was an age of heroic forgers in a good cause, when Welsh, Irish, Scots, Czechs, Catalans, Americans and certainly English, invented 'traditions' to serve a novel, democratic purpose. Only in our own century has 'Mad Ned' been cut free from his fantasies.

Yet, in that process, Iolo is not seriously diminished. Some of the poems he fathered on Dafydd ap Gwilym, for example, are as good as anything the master ever wrote! It is important to grasp the nature of these forgeries. Iolo, after all, fabrications aside, was a major scholar, the first serious Welsh folklorist, the first to call for a Welsh national library, museum and eisteddfod. What he had was an intuitive understanding of the *historical* function of Welsh traditions and of their *functional utility* to the starved, neglected and often self-despising Welsh of his own day.

Time after time, he would (correctly) identify a truth; he would (again correctly) identify a necessary connection between it and another truth; if he found no evidence in the record to warrant this connection, he would then 'supply' it, in brilliant historical mimicry! A myth of this kind takes liberties with facts in the cause of truth!

He perceived, for example, that Welsh poets had not been 'poets' as the English use the word. They had been the rib-cage of the body politic. They had been a collective memory honed for historic action. Their function had been to enable a Welsh present to construct a usable Welsh past to serve an attainable Welsh future. They had been remembrancers.

The English court had had its King's Remembrancer and its Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer. Iolo wanted to create a cadre of People's Remembrancers, whom he saw, awash he was in laudum and manuscripts, as descendants of those ancient and liberarian Druids, whose Natural Religion had anticipated Rousseau's, unitarian in its belief in a single god who was a human principle, Masonic in its descent through

secret societies of the Enlightened, burrowing like Marx's Old Mole to overthrow an unjust society. Iolo's Gorsedd was to be the directive and democratic elite of a new and democratic Welsh nation conceived in liberty. They were to be People's Remembrancers to a Welsh Republic.

The first attempts to hold a Gorsedd were harassed by the police in the 1790s. A pale shadow of it lodged precariously in the Eisteddfod from 1819, but not until the later nineteenth century was it fully absorbed in a rich panoply of ever-expanding pageantry. In itself, this was part of that process in which Welsh society itself was absorbed into the new hegemony, its Welsh-language culture rendered merely a transposition of English. Today, the Gorsedd can be graced by such people's remembrancers as the Queen and Lord Tonypanody.

Today, we are all painfully conscious that the Gorsedd's culture is that of only one in five of our people; we are far more conscious of the mythical nature of our tradition than the English are of the mythical nature of the multiplicity of their 'ancient traditions' which were manufactured in the nineteenth century, their pantomime and peepshow of a monarchy (to quote Thomas Paine) above all.

Yet, those learned and often reverend gentlemen, their trousers peeping out of their white sheets and tasteful wellies, are in fact rehearsing ceremonies which Iolo devised, in good Deist and Subversive fashion to 'abolish' both Christianity and Oppression.

Iolo used the word Republic as Thomas Paine used it in his classic definition 'King and Commons *can* make a good Republic, King, Lords and commons, *never*.' We can translate Paine into our own terms. And we can translate our Gorsedd, too. As Professor John Vincent of Bristol, of recent notoriety, once said to me, in tones of asperity, 'The Welsh are a bizarre people. They are the only people I know who elect their intellectuals.'

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